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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 05 NEW DELHI 002270

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [IN](#) [PK](#)

SUBJECT: A SMALL STEP, A GIANT LEAP: FULL SPEED AHEAD FOR KASHMIR BUS

Classified By: Polcouns Geoffrey Pyatt, for Reasons 1.4 (B, D)

1. (C) Summary: Preparations for what J&K Chief Minister Mufti Mohammad Sayeed has called the "mother of all CBMs," the first bus to cross the LOC.
2. (U) As April 7 approaches, the Srinagar-Muzaffarabad bus is increasingly seizing Indian imaginations in J&K and beyond. The national media and Senior GOI attention is focused on the event, with the PM scheduled to travel to Srinagar to see it off, perhaps joined by Sonia Gandhi, who will be the first Indian Prime Minister to do so.
3. (C) Although Chief Minister Mufti Mohammad Sayeed has been careful about giving credit to New Delhi and Islamabad for their leadership in the process, the bus is a symbol of Indian and Pakistani cooperation.
4. (U) The Indian media have carried extensive reports of military units from both countries working together to widen roads, clear mines, and remove obstacles.
5. (U) Information varies regarding the number of buses that will travel, with some reports suggesting that two will carry 19 passengers each and others suggesting that only one will.
6. (C) Journalists in Srinagar tell us that 150 travel permit forms were issued on March 4 and 500 on March 21, on a first come, first served basis.
7. (C) Technically, all Indians are eligible to travel, but non-Kashmiris are not likely to be on the first buses, given the focus on re-urbanization.
8. (U) Information on the mechanics of the crossing at the LOC is sketchy, contradictory, and in flux, journalists who have visited the site thereupon, they will board a bus on the Pakistani side and continue their journey.
9. (C) In view of press and other reports that jihadis may attack the buses, Indian security forces have been taking special precautions.
10. (C) In a March 22 conversation with PolCouns, outgoing MEA J/S (Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran) Arun K Singh downplayed concerns about the bus.
11. (C) Kashmiri politicians and civic groups have begun to notice that few people will actually travel on the bus because of its low capacity.
12. (C) Not to be outdone, National Conference (NC) President Omar Abdullah has joined the bandwagon to advocate daily service, commenting that the bus is a "step in the right direction."
13. (C) Experts in ethnic and linguistic patterns in Indian and Pakistani Kashmir have reminded us that the vast majority of divided families live near the LOC.
14. (C) Puri and others argue that the concentration of divided families near the LOC made the current arrangement for the bus unusually effective.
15. (C) A recent story in "The Week" reported that at least 60,000 residents in the Uri and Baramulla districts have relatives across the LOC.
16. (C) In meetings this week with D/Polcouns in Delhi, all major moderate All-Parties Hurriyat Conference (APHC) leaders expressed support for the bus.
17. (C) The moderate Hurriyat leaders have confirmed to us their interest in travelling on the bus, but said they would wait until the security situation improves.
18. (C) Not all reaction has been positive, with criticism continuing to come from assorted hardline separatists, Hindu nationalists, and Kashmiri hardline, pro-Pakistan separatist SAS Geelani has called the bus a "non-issue," "part of the Indian agenda," and "merely a toy to pacify the masses."
19. (C) The "Panun Kashmir" Pandit group has commented that the road will do nothing to improve their continued plight. The Hindu nationalist RSS has termed the bus "insane" and "fraught with serious consequences for the country's security," highlighting the fact that the bus is a symbol of Indian and Pakistani cooperation.
20. (U) Even liberal commentators on Kashmir and well-wishers of Indo-Pak amity like the Mumbai-based writer AG Noorani have joined the chorus of criticism.
21. (C) This is no ordinary road, and no ordinary bus; it is one of the biggest Kashmir stories in many, many years. Although it is important to filter out the media hype, the enthusiasm in J&K and elsewhere in India for this development is genuine, palpable.
22. (C) Although it does not deal directly with the "core issue" of Kashmir, the bus has the potential to begin a new era in intra-Kashmiri dialogue.

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